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ABSTRACT

A new educational psychology course that combines mastery oriented content learning with direct participation in an elementary school classroom is described. The integration of theoretical-empirical information from psychology with the applied view of education in the classroom is the most important outcome of the new course. A variety of learning activities in the course are described. A preliminary evaluation shows the course to be perceived by students as difficult but interesting and worthwhile. The course involves team teaching. An important aspect of this program is that it has been designed to fit into an existing format with relatively little difficulty. (Authors)

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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A FIELD-BASED EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY EXPERIENCE

Introduction

A recent article by Englander [1] suggests the status of Educational Psychology in teacher education programs might be in jeopardy because educational psychologists have not done enough in the area of the application of psychological principles and learning theories to the classroom. Englander's prescription for revitalizing Educational Psychology includes the following suggestions.

1. Cut the umbilical cord to traditional psychology by deemphasizing research findings conducted primarily in the laboratory using infrahuman subjects.
2. Focus on the nature of individuals.
3. Focus attention of students on the act of teaching.
4. Bring educational psychology directly into the teacher education curriculum by team teaching the course with colleagues involved in field experience and other preparatory courses.

During the past year, the authors developed a course which combines educational psychology and school experiences for students who are anticipating a career in elementary or early childhood teaching. Although we worked independently of Englander, we believe our course fulfills, at least in part, each of his four prescriptions for change. We hope that it might serve as a model for others who wish to change the teaching of Educational Psychology.

Background

At Towson State University and in many other teacher education programs around the nation, students are required to take a course in Educational Psychology either for state certification purposes or to meet a departmental requirement. The Educational Psychology courses at Towson have long been taught by members of the Psychology Department. Unfortunately, there has been relatively little dialogue between the two faculties of Education and Psychology despite the similarity of goals, overlapping content, and the close relationship of many of the courses taught by the two groups.

Spurred on by the fact that the Education and Psychology departments are soon to be housed jointly in a new classroom building, an Education-Psychology liason group was formed to promote collaborative efforts and to plan for effective use of the new facility. At one of the first committee meetings, the possibility of effectively integrating some of the psychology courses with laboratory experiences in the schools prior to student teaching was discussed. In response to this need, the authors*representing each of the two disciplines - met to attempt to design an experience which incorporated the following elements:

THEORIES OF TEACHING AND LEARNING	⟷	OBSERVATIONS OF THE TEACHING-LEARNING PROCESS
ACADEMIC CONTENT	⟷	PRACTICUM-PARTICIPATION
PLANNED EXPERIENCES	⟷	SELF-DIRECTED EXPERIENCES

GENERAL DESIGN AND PROGRAM FORMAT

It was decided to map out a framework which would not require any extensive revamping of new course proposals and which could be quickly expedited through existing offerings. In order to accomplish this, we combined on an experimental basis two established courses: Field Study in Elementary Education and Educational Psychology. Field Study in Elementary Education attempts to give students an early opportunity (freshman/sophomore) to field test their interest in teaching by working one-half day per week in a public school. Educational Psychology reviews traditional theories of intelligence, development, learning personality, motivation, and evaluation; and their implications for teaching. Working under a small grant from the university, the two instructors endeavored to make a meaningful synthesis of theory and practice. From the beginning, the program was conceived as interdisciplinary in nature, as a single academic offering, and as a team teaching venture.

For registration purposes, one section of each of these courses was reserved and designated as a "Special Combination". Students were required to enroll in both courses. Enrollment was by special permit, with a maximum of 25 students accepted on an experimental basis the instructors tried to explain in advance that this combination might require some expenditure of time and effort in excess of that normally spent in these courses.

It was then necessary to locate a school that could accommodate a group of our size and could furnish a room that could be used as a classroom by the instructors one day a week.

Fortunately, an excellent K-6 elementary school located just five minutes drive from the campus agreed to participate in our cooperative course "experiment". The school had, among other things, two EMR classrooms, a reading teacher, a Speech teacher, and a guidance counselor exceptionally well versed in educational tests. Our students were able to make good use of all of these resources. The school also gave us a small classroom-storage room for our use one day per week. It was used for teaching, discussion-seminars, quizzing, luncheons; it was our "home base", an invaluable asset.

The course was scheduled on a regular Tuesday-Thursday sequence. Tuesday was always on on-campus meeting devoted to lectures, discussions, or films. Thursday was divided into two time periods equaling the amount of time each course would normally have met. However, since Thursday meetings were always off campus, the students were, in effect, out in the field the bulk of the school day. Both instructors tried to be present for all experiences.

The opportunities for flexible programming opened up by this format were numerous and challenging. Each student was assigned to a classroom under the supervision of a cooperating teacher and the college instructors. Since most of the students had no previous teaching experiences, their role was mainly that of aide or assistant. Great emphasis was put on the importance of active participation and involvement. Students were almost always in the classrooms during the morning session, and some Thursdays were reserved for all-day classroom participation. Students met with the college instructors either as a total group, in small groups, or as individuals for discussion, clarification, planning, evaluating, or consulation purposes.

There were planned seminars on such topics as curriculum planning and record keeping, educational philosophy, school resource personnel, and the preparation of educational materials. These seminars were arranged with the cooperation of the school administration. Students who had special individual interests in such areas as Reading, Special Education or Speech were given options for observation for working in these programs. Students could also spent time with more than one grade level if they so desired.

Implementation of the Program

A key concern at all times was the meaningful linking of the practicum experinece with the academic course content. For example, when the topic of motivation was discussed in class, it was followed by a symposium at the school which provided dialogue between classroom teachers, specialists, and administration representatives on the reality of how theories of motivation can be utilized and implemented in the school. Students learned about behavioral objectives and then wrote behavioral objectives as they planned their scheduled teaching sequences. Cognitive and social development theories were reified for the students as they replicated Piaget's classic demonstrations and observed the typical sex-role behavior of their children in the school.

There were three major tests, and weekly quizzes covered the material in the lecture or topic for that week. These were take-home quizzes designed to help students master the content and study purposefully. Quizzes were always discussed at some point during the Thursday school session.

The most distinctive aspect of our experiment centered around the project/papers, child study, and supervised school participation activities. Project papers required the student to validate a theory or replicate a piece of research such as Piaget's conservation tasks by actually collecting and analyzing data from children. The children at our school center were utilized as subjects for these studies.

The capstone experience for the course was the writing of an intensive child study which involved the analysis of one child in depth. This on-going project required the collection of weekly observational data, the utilization of information from school records such as intelligence and aptitude scores, academic grades, health records, and psychological and social worker's entries when applicable. Informal discussions were held with teachers and staff concerning the child.

Following a skill session devoted to the teaching of observational techniques, the group was expected to prepare anecdotal records, timed observations of behavior patterns and frequency records about the behavior of the individual whom they had selected. The college students were in the unique position of being able to observe the child in a realistic setting on an informal and natural basis in a variety of situations over a fourteen week period. This enabled them to identify important influences in the school life of the individual and to make tentative projections and predictions--certainly an important aspect of the role of the teacher.

The practicum portion of the course included the preparation of bulletin boards, learning stations, materials for classroom use, and the teaching of a short lesson to a small group or to the total class. Students chose from a large selection of projects that included such activities as attendance at professional meetings, visits to special

education centers, community walking tours, tutoring, and the preparation of pic.ure files, aids and ideas files, classroom displays, or exhibits.

Evaluation

The success of this combined Psychology-Education experience depended on a number of very important factors. These included the very fine professional expertise and cooperation of the school, the support or our respective chairpersons, and most importantly, on the working relationship of the two instructors.

How well did it work? We aren't sure. The logistics of getting the show on the road left us with very little time for doing the type of scholarly evaluation and record keeping that might have answered this question. We know that our students were enthusiastic. So were we as instructors. We wanted to make it work. We were willing to give it time. Some of this enthusiasm and the excitement of doing something new and different may have spilled over to the participants.

Revisions were made as we discerned that we might be asking too much of our students. Some major changes were effected the second semester based on student input. Students work very hard in an experience such as this. Their efforts cannot always be measured in terms of college course credits, hours on college schedules, or even by cognitive measures. Most students told us that they had put in many hours preparing classroom materials. Many students came voluntarily to the school to complete projects, observe further, or to have additional participation experiences. Whether this is more work collectively than it would be for the two courses individually is difficult to assess. We as instructors and they as students developed a much closer realtionship than we would normally have had.

In some cases, students made career decisions based on their experiences. For some, the decision to teach was reinforced, and for some, the reality of this experience was the determining factor in a decision to work with children in some other type of setting or to seek another major. Generally speaking, students told us that they thought this was a very positive and worthwhile learning experience for them. For us, there was the satisfaction of having numerous chances to do informal teaching and counseling simply because we were there.

Classroom sessions were frequently interspersed with examples and comments based on perceptions gained through the first hand school observations. This enhanced our program and added an enthusiastic and personal element which supplemented the textbook readings.

Since we treated the course as a unit, we arrived at student grades cooperatively, based on a point system which we had explained at the beginning of the semester. A final conference was held with each individual to discuss the quality of the participation, help with career decisions, and to clarify any questions about theory or practice.

It has been hectic but exciting. We look forward to continuing our experiment and would encourage others to seek new formats for making Educational Psychology a positive and forceful element of professional teacher education.

Reference

1. Englander, M. E. "Educational Psychology and Teacher Education." Phi Delta Kappan, March, 1976, pp. 440-448